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W.M. (39)

18th Conclusions.

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WAR CABINET 18 (39).

*CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Sunday, September 17, 1939, at 12 noon.*

Present :

The Right Hon. Sir JOHN SIMON, K.C., M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer (*in the Chair*).

The Right Hon. Sir KINGSLEY WOOD, M.P., Secretary of State for Air. | The Right Hon. LORD HANKEY, Minister without Portfolio.

The following were also present :

Sir LANCELOT OLIPHANT, Deputy Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office. | Admiral of the Fleet Sir DUDLEY POUND, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff.

Lieutenant-General Sir RONALD ADAM, Bt., Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff. | Air Vice-Marshal R. E. C. PEIRSE, Deputy Chief of the Air Staff.

*Secretariat.*

Sir RUPERT HOWORTH.

Major-General H. L. ISMAY.

Mr. F. HEMMING.

Mr. W. D. WILKINSON.

Lieutenant-Colonel V. DYKES, R.E.

Lieutenant-Colonel E. I. C. JACOB, R.E.

WAR CABINET 18 (30).

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Air Operations.  
(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 17th  
Conclusions,  
Minute 1.)

1. *The Secretary of State for Air* informed the War Cabinet that a reconnaissance, which had been carried out the previous day, did not confirm the reports which had been received of a large concentration of German aircraft on the Island of Sylt. It was thought that the reports might have been put out by the Germans, perhaps with the object of making us attack a strongly defended but unimportant objective. There were no other operations to report.

Reference was made to Telegram No. 155, dated the 16th September, from Copenhagen in which Sir P. Ramsay stated that he had confirmed from a most reliable source the existence of a big concentration of German aircraft at Sylt and Glucksburg, near Flensburg.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement and invited the Secretary of State for Air to consider whether a reconnaissance should be carried out at Glucksburg.

Naval  
Operations.  
(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 17th  
Conclusions,  
Minute 3.)

2. *The First Sea Lord* said that an outward bound merchant ship, the *Aviemore*, had been sunk by a submarine, three miles ahead of the convoy of which it should have formed a part. The matter was being investigated.

The *City of Paris*, which was in the northbound East coast convoy, had been mined off Aldeburgh. It was hoped to get her into port. There was reason to believe that the *City of Paris*, and two ships previously reported as sunk, were victims of "magnetic mines." These were mines laid on the bottom of the sea, which exploded when a magnetised body passed above them. They were more difficult to deal with than ordinary mines, as they could not be swept up in the usual way. The Admiralty would take steps to deal with them if their presence were established.

There had been six attacks on enemy submarines and a casualty amongst our own shipping was reported from the Dover minefield. A tug which had gone to the assistance of the two destroyers which had been in collision (W.M. (39), 13th Conclusions, Minute 2) had also been torpedoed.

In reply to an enquiry by the Minister without Portfolio, the First Sea Lord said that all merchant ships were being fitted with paravanes. So far as was known, the *Bremen* was still at Murmansk.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

The Military  
Situation in  
Poland.

The Russian  
Invasion of  
Poland.

(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 17th  
Conclusions,  
Minute 4.)

3. *The Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff* said that no recent news had been received from our Military Mission regarding the German-Polish operations.

The most serious news, received early that morning, concerned the Russian invasion of the Eastern Frontier of Poland. As would be seen from Sir W. Seeds' Telegram No. 286 of the 17th September, the Soviet Government were said to have stated "that there was no proper Government in Poland with whom they could get into touch, and that, without abandoning their neutral attitude, they felt compelled to protect the interests of White Russian and Ukrainian Minorities in Poland."

Reference was also made to information published earlier in the day in Berlin to the effect that Russian troops had crossed Poland's Eastern Frontier at several places at 6 A.M. that morning.

A discussion took place as to the military implications of this new development. The War Cabinet were informed that, speaking generally, this Russian invasion would tend to hasten the military

collapse of the Poles, particularly if the Russian troops overrun South-East Poland and so cut Poland's communications with Roumania. If, however, the Russian invasion was limited to North-East Poland (North of the Pinsk Marshes), where the country is mainly inhabited by White Russians, who it might be assumed would not fight in any event, the effect *vis-à-vis* Germany and Poland might not be very serious, as the Germans would then have to continue fighting the scattered units of the Polish Army throughout those parts of the country inhabited by Polish nationals inside and outside the areas already overrun by Germany.

In any event, it might be expected that the Russian advance would certainly be slow and that, if the Russians penetrated as far as the Carpathians, their presence there, while cutting off the Poles from Roumania, would also have the effect of impeding the progress of, and might indeed wholly prevent, a German advance from Poland into Roumania, since the Russian and German lines of communication would be crossing in the Lemberg area. So far as was known, the Germans had up to the present only been able to move one mechanised and one infantry division towards South-eastern Poland. Communications from South-eastern Poland into Roumania, both rail and road, were very bad and it would, in any circumstances, be difficult for Germany to stage a large-scale invasion of the latter country by that route. Indeed, if Germany decided to invade Roumania, she would be much more likely to do so via Hungary than through South-eastern Poland.

The suggestion was made that it was probable that the Germans had agreed at Moscow that this Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland should take place. It was disturbing to think that some similar secret agreement might have been made between the two countries in regard to Roumania. When the German and Russian troops made contact in Poland, Hitler would be faced with the problem of preventing the dissemination of Bolshevik doctrines in Germany, in regard to which he had hitherto held very strong views.

The War Cabinet were informed that no confirmation had up to the present been received regarding the broadcast announcement that the Germans had delivered an ultimatum to Warsaw to the effect that, unless the city was surrendered within 12 hours, it would be treated as part of the battle area.

The British Military Mission was not at present in touch with the War Office, but was believed to be close to the Roumanian frontier and to His Majesty's Ambassador and the staff of the British Embassy, who were, for the time being, at Kutý.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statements regarding the present Military situation in Poland and invited the Chancellor of the Exchequer to communicate with the Prime Minister on the subject to the effect indicated in Minute 11 of these conclusions.

Military Situation on the Western Front. (Previous Reference: W.M. (39) 16th Conclusions, Minute 7.)

4. *The Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff* reported that no more fighting had taken place on the Western Front beyond minor engagements in the outpost zones. The despatch of the Field Force was proceeding smoothly.

The War Cabinet took note of this statement.

**Enemy Shipping  
in Neutral  
Ports.**

(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 16th  
Conclusions,  
Minute 5.)

5. *The Minister without Portfolio* enquired whether steps were being taken to keep a special watch on the mass of enemy merchant shipping in neutral ports, so that the Admiralty could be supplied with prompt information of the intended transfer of any of them to a neutral flag, and of their removal from the port at which they were lying.

*Sir Lancelot Oliphant* said that the Foreign Office had recently written to the Admiralty on this point, but he undertook to investigate it further, in consultation with the appropriate authorities.

The War Cabinet agreed that the matter should be taken up as one of urgency by the Foreign Office, Admiralty, Board of Trade and any other Departments concerned.

**Roumania.  
Attitude to  
Polish Refugees.**

(Previous  
Reference:  
W.M. (39) 17th  
Conclusions,  
Minute 17.)

6. *Sir Lancelot Oliphant* stated that M. Beck was known to be in the South-Eastern corner of Poland, but there was no information regarding the whereabouts of other members of the Polish Government. As the War Cabinet were aware, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had sent a telegram (No. 402) on the previous day (16th September, 1939) to His Majesty's Minister, Bucharest, asking him to ascertain what would be the attitude of the Roumanian Government if the Polish Government were to flee into Roumania.

In this connection, reference was made to telegram No. 187, dated 15th September, 1939, received from His Majesty's Minister, Sofia, stating that the Bulgarian Prime Minister had informed him that evening that he had learnt from a sure source in Berlin, that Germany had warned Roumania some days ago that, if she allowed the Polish Government to establish itself on, and to direct war from, Roumanian soil, Germany would regard this as a breach of Roumanian neutrality and would be obliged to take sanctions against Roumania.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

**Poland.  
The Galician  
Oilfields.**

7. Arising out of the discussion recorded in Minute 3 above, *the Minister without Portfolio* enquired whether there was any information to show that the Polish oilfields in Galicia had been effectively destroyed. A summary of the discussion which took place on this matter is recorded on the Secretary's standard file of Conclusions.

**Anglo-Polish  
Agreement in  
Relation to an  
Invasion of  
Poland by the  
U.S.S.R.**

8. In reply to a question by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, *Sir Lancelot Oliphant* said that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had had a discussion on the previous day with M. Corbin, the French Ambassador, in regard to the position which would arise under the Anglo-Polish Agreement if the Government of the U.S.S.R. were to invade Poland. *Sir Lancelot* explained that Lord Halifax had not yet approved the record prepared of his discussion with M. Corbin, but that subject to this qualification he understood that Lord Halifax had expressed the opinion that the provisions of the Anglo-Polish Agreement would not come into operation as a result of Soviet aggression against Poland, since the Agreement provided for action to be taken by His Majesty's Government only if Poland suffered aggression from a European power, and there was a further understanding between the two Governments that the European power in question was Germany. On this interpretation Great Britain was not bound by treaty to become involved in war with the

U.S.S.R. as a result of their invasion of Poland. M. Corbin had indicated that the French Government took the same view. Sir Lancelot added that Lord Halifax had arranged to see the Prime Minister that afternoon (17th September).

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

Departure of  
Soviet Officials  
from the United  
Kingdom.

9. In the course of the discussion recorded in Minute 8 above, reference was made to rumours that Soviet officials in Great Britain were preparing to leave the country.

*Sir Lancelot Oliphant* said that there was no confirmation of the rumour current the previous day that M. Maisky, the U.S.S.R. Ambassador in London, was preparing to close his Embassy. As regards another rumour that the Soviet Trade Delegation in London were preparing to leave, the War Cabinet would have seen telegram 284, dated the 16th September, 1939, received from His Majesty's Ambassador, Moscow, stating, in reply to an enquiry by the Secretary of State, that he had no information that the Soviet Trade Delegation were proposing to leave London, but that it was possible that certain officials might be returning to the U.S.S.R. in view of the falling-off in Anglo-Soviet trade.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

United States of  
America.

Advice to  
United States  
citizens to avoid  
ships of  
belligerent  
countries.

10. *The Chancellor of the Exchequer* enquired whether there was any confirmation of the report published in the Sunday press, in connection with the arrival yesterday of the Steamship *Aquitania* in New York, that, prior to the departure of that vessel from Southampton, the American Ambassador in London had despatched a representative to the vessel to warn United States Nationals against travelling in a ship flying the flag of a belligerent Power. If this report was well founded, it suggested that the American Ambassador was acting on instructions given by the Secretary of State in Washington, with the object of doing everything possible to prevent the United States from becoming embroiled with Germany.

*Sir Lancelot Oliphant* said that the Foreign Office were not in a position either to confirm or deny the accuracy of the Press-report referred to above.

The War Cabinet took note of the above statement.

Message to be  
sent to the  
Prime Minister.

11. The War Cabinet agreed:—

That, at the close of the meeting, the Chancellor of the Exchequer should speak on the telephone to the Prime Minister, who was at Chequers, and should:—

(a) inform him that the War Cabinet had received a preliminary report on the invasion of Poland by the U.S.S.R. and that it appeared:—

(i) that the Russian advance would almost certainly be very slow;

(ii) that, if confirmation were forthcoming of the report that the Soviet advance was taking place along the whole line including their South-Eastern Frontier, such action might be expected to hinder rather than to facilitate a German advance into Rumania.

- (iii) that against the favourable factor indicated in (ii) above, there must be set the view of the General Staff that, if Germany were to decide to invade Rumania, she would in any event be more likely to do so via Hungary than through South-Eastern Poland;
  - (iv) that it must be recognised that, in so far as Soviet troops might occupy Polish territory, they would to that extent relieve Germany of the necessity for maintaining troops in Poland for the purpose of cleaning up after the final collapse of Polish resistance;
- (b) convey to the Prime Minister the view of the War Cabinet that there was no need for him or other Ministers to accelerate their return to London.

*Richmond Terrace, S.W. 1,  
September 17, 1939.*

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